

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 5168

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SUBJ: ELECTION FORECASTS: OUTLOOK FOR JUNE 4 PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION

REF: BOGOTA 4965

1. SUMMARY. IN THE FINAL DAYS BEFORE THE JUNE 4 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION THE POLITICAL MOOD IN COLOMBIA HAS SHIFTED. CONSERVATIVES PROFESS, AT LEAST OUTWARDLY, CONFIDENCE THAT THEIR CANDIDATE WILL WIN. IN SO DOING, THEY MAY HAVE UNINTENTIONALLY PERFORMED A SERVICE FOR THEIR LIBERAL OPPONENTS BY JARRING THEM OUT OF THEIR COMPLACENCY. THE LIBERALS ARE RUNNING SCARED, LOUDLY BEATING THE DRUMS OF PARTY LOYALTY AND WAVING THE BUG-A-BOO OF A POSSIBLE CONSERVATIVE VICTORY. THE EMBASSY STANDS BY ITS EARLIER ESTIMATE OF A 300-500,000 TURBAY VOTE MARGIN OVER BETANCUR. END SUMMARY.

2. IN THESE LAST DAYS BEFORE THE ELECTION THE MOOD OF COLOMBIA'S POLITICAL CLASS HAS UNDERGONE A PERCEPTIBLE SHIFT. A WAVE OF EUPHORIA HAS SWEEPED THE CONSERVATIVE CAMP. CONSERVATIVE LEADERS HAVE BEGUN TO INTRODUCE BETANCUR AT GATHERINGS AS THE PRESIDENT-ELECT, AND BETANCUR HAS SENT INVITATIONS TO SUPPORTERS AND CONTRIBUTORS FOR A RECEPTION (BLACK TIE, THESE ARE CONSERVATIVES)
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CELEBRATING HIS ELECTORAL VICTORY, TO BE HELD ON JUNE2.

3. EVEN BY THEIR OWN OPTIMISTIC COUNT, CONSERVATIVES HAVE LITTLE CAUSE FOR SUCH CONFIDENCE. ACCORDING TO THEIR OWN CALCULATIONS, THE CONSERVATIVES SAY THEY WILL WIN BY AROUND A MERE 200,000 VOTES, OF AN ESTIMATED 4.5 MILLION VOTES THAT WILL BE CAST. ONE NOTABLE EXCEPTION, AND INDICATIVE OF THE CONFUSED PERCEPTIONS OF THIS

ELECTION, WAS THE REMARKABLY FRANK ADMISSION OF CONSERVATIVE LEADER AND FORMER PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE ALVARO GOMEZ, WHO IN A PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH THE AMBASSADOR ON MAY 31 SAID THAT FOUR OR FIVE DAYS EARLIER HE BELIEVED THAT BETANCUR WOULD WIN. SINCE THEN, HOWEVER

HE HAD BECOME CONVINCED THAT TURBAY'S CAMPAIGN HAD "TAKEN OFF" AND THAT THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE WAS NOW LIKELY TO FINISH AHEAD.

4. LIBERALS, NONPLUSSED BY THE OUTWARD SHOW OF CONSERVATIVE CONFIDENCE, HAVE ENGAGED IN SOUL SEARCHING AND SELF-CRITICISM, AND HAVE BECOME MORE AWARE OF WEAKNESSES IN THEIR CANDIDATE'S CAMPAIGN. ONE SOURCE, CLOSE TO PRESIDENT LOPEZ, HAS REPORTED LOPEZ'S JITTERS OVER THE POSSIBILITY OF A CONSERVATIVE VICTORY. ANOTHER LIBERAL EXPRESSED TO THE AMBASSADOR HIS CHAGRIN OVER TURBAY'S TENDENCY TO LIMIT HIS APPEARANCES TO THE LARGE CITIES, WHILE BETANCUR EXTENDED HIS TO INCLUDE TOWNS AND VILLAGES, RELATIVELY SMALL BUT WHICH NEVERTHELESS REPRESENT SIGNIFICANT POPULATION CENTERS. IN ADDITION, TURBAY'S ATTRIBUTES AS A CAMPAIGNER HAVE COME TO BE PERCEIVED AS DRAWBACKS: HIS SERIOUS, PONDEROUS PERSONALITY, NASAL TONE IN UNFAVORABLE CONTRAST TO BETANCUR'S RELAXED, SMILING, OUTGOING STYLE AND MELLI-FLUOUS VOICE. EVEN TURBAY'S CHARACTERISTIC BOWTIE HAS BEEN SIGNLED OUT AS UNFASHIONABLE AND A VOTE LOSER. LIBERALS, HOWEVER, ARE FAR FROM DISHEARTENED AND HAVE REACTED TO CONSERVATIVE TRIUMPHALISM DURING THE FINAL DAYS OF THE CAMPAIGN WITH FURIOUS ACTIVITY, TO GENERATE VOTER ENTHUSIASM, AND EVEN FEAR OVER THE CLEAR POSSI-
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BILITY OF A CONSERVATIVE VICTORY AND A RETURN TO THE PERIOD OF PERSECUTION OF LIBERALS. ALTHOUGH THE PUBLIC CAMPAIGN ENDED ON MAY 28, BOTH LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE POLITICANS CONTINUE TO PROSELYTIZE THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY IN INDOOR GATHERINGS, WHICH ARE PERMITTED. LIBERAL ESTIMATES OF TURBAY'S MARGIN OVER BETANCUR RANGE UPWARDS FROM 400,000 VOTES. IN A CONVERSATION ON MAY 31 WITH THE AMBASSADOR, TURBAY SAID HE WOULD WIN BY A MILLION VOTES.

5. WE BELIEVE OUR EARLIER ESTIMATE (REFTEL) OF A 300-500,000 TURBAY VOTE MARGIN OVER BETANCUR IS STILL VALID. A FEW DAYS AGO WE WERE PREPARED TO REVISE THIS ESTIMATE DOWNWARD BUT WE BELIEVE THAT THE FINAL BURST OF PARTISAN ACTIVISM IN THE LAST FEW DAYS BY LIBERAL CAMPAIGNERS AND IMPORTANT LIBERAL PRESS ORGANS HAS REGAINED WHATEVER GROUND THAT TURBAY MAY HAVE LOST.

6. THIS CAMPAIGN CONTAINS MORE ELEMENTS OF UNCERTAINTY THAN DO MOST SUCH CONTESTS AND THE ABSENCE OF CREDIBLE POLLS HAS SERVED TO EMPHASIZE THIS UNCERTAINTY. PROBABLY THE MOST SCIENTIFIC SUCH POLL, CONDUCTED HOWEVER OVER A SMALL BASE, HAS TURBAY WINNING BY SOMETHING OVER 100,000 VOTES, BUT THE POLL ALLOWS FOR A MARGIN OF ERROR OF 200,000 EITHER WAY. AMONG THE IMPONDERABLES ARE: THE NATURE OF THE PRINCIPAL CANDIDATES THEMSELVES, NEITHER OF WHOM

COMMANDS THE PERSONAL ATTACHMENT OF THEIR PARTIES' MORE TRADITIONAL RANK AND FILE; TURBAY IS TOO "CONSERVATIVE" OR CORRUPTIBLE FOR SOME LIBERALS AND BETANCUR TOO "LEFTIST" FOR MANY CONSERVATIVES. THERE IS ALSO THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY OF RETIRED GENERAL VALENCIA TOVAR'S CANDIDACY. ESTIMATES OF HIS PROBABLE VOTE COUNT VARY WIDELY. THE TRUTH IS, NO ONE HAS A CLEAR IDEA OF THE GENERAL'S VOTING STRENGTH, ALTHOUGH WE ESTIMATE IT AT NOT MORE THAN 200,000.

7. ONE POSSIBLE DIFFICULTY COULD ARISE IN THE EVENT THAT THE VOTE COUNT GAVE EITHER OF THE TWO MAIN CANDIDATES A VICTORY BY A NARROW MARGIN, PERHAPS LESS THAN 200,000 VOTES. SINCE RETURNS FROM ISOLATED DISTRICTS WILL BE DELAYED AND THE FINAL OFFICIAL VOTE COUNT MIGHT NOT BE KNOWN FOR SEVERAL DAYS, OR EVEN WEEKS THE ABSENCE OF AN UNMISTAKABLE AND EARLY ELECTORAL DECISION COULD GIVE

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RISE TO A PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY AND TENSION. THIS WOULD BE HEIGHTTENED BY THE INEVITABLE CHARGES OF VOTESTEALING AND FRAUD. ALVARO GOMEZ ALLUDED TO THIS EVENTUALITY IN HIS CONVERSATION WITH THE AMBASSADOR, IN WHICH HE PLACED THE "SAFE" VICTORY MARGIN AT 300,000 VOTES. GOMEZ DID NOT FORESEE THAT A "DOMINICAN REPUBLIC" TYPE SITUATION WOULD ARISE NOR THE LIKELIHOOD OF VIOLENCE, BUT STRESSED THAT SUCH A SITUATION WOULD BE "TENSE." WE AGREE THAT, IN SUCH A CONTINGENCY, THE PRIME MOVERS IN BOTH PARTIES WOULD WAIT FOR AND ABIDE BY THE FINAL DECISION OF THE POLLS, IN LARGE PART BECAUSE THE AGENCY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE VOTE COUNT AND TABULATION IS WIDELY RESPECTED FOR ITS PROBITY, IF NOT FOR ALACRITY.

8. PUBLIC ORDER. STUDENT DISORDERS FOCUSSING CHIEFLY AROUND UNIVERSITIES IN BOGOTA AND MEDELLIN ARE LIKELY TO CONTINUE, POSSIBLY THROUGH ELECTION DAY, FOLLOWING CLASHES BETWEEN SECURITY FORCES AND STUDENTS IN BOGOTA ON MAY 30 IN WHICH A STUDENT WAS KILLED AND SEVERAL OTHERS INJURED. SECURITY FORCES SHOULD BE ABLE TO CONTAIN THESE TROUBLESPOTS SO THAT THEY WILL NOT DISRUPT VOTING ON SUNDAY. OTHERWISE, THE EMBASSY'S ESTIMATE OF THE PUBLIC ORDER SITUATION FOR ELECTION DAY IN REFTEL STILL STANDS.

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